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ABSTRACT

The federal Migrant Education Program aims to minimize the negative effects on migrant children and youth caused by constant mobility and interrupted schooling. A primary activity of the program involves considerable efforts to identify and recruit children eligible for services. However, finding migrant children is not an easy task. This digest provides an overview of how to develop a realistic and workable system for quickly finding and enrolling eligible students. The first step for the recruiter is to develop a picture of the region's agriculture, processing, and fishing industries and their use of migrant workers. Information sources include the Department of Agriculture, the state Department of Labor, Cooperative Extension programs, and other regulatory agencies. Next, development of a recruitment plan should consider input from those working with the migrant population and should include at least the following components: hiring recruiters who have qualities appropriate to this demanding job and, preferably, have the same language and culture as the families served; deploying recruiters strategically; building a recruitment network with local organizations and individuals; and keeping recruiters informed of all available program services. Training of recruiters should cover program eligibility, assessment of family needs, cultural practices and etiquette, recruiter safety, and program audits. (Contains 10 references.) (SV)

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Identification and Recruitment of Migrant Students: Strategies and Resources

Ray Melecio and Thomas J. Hanley

Interrupted schooling, low socioeconomic status, as well as language and cultural differences are primary causes for many migrant children's poor performance in school (López, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001; U.S. Department of Education, 1994). The goal of the federal Migrant Education Program is to minimize the negative health, developmental, and educational effects caused by constant mobility and interrupted schooling. A primary activity of the program involves considerable efforts to identify and recruit children eligible for services. Finding migrant children, however, is not an easy task. This Digest provides an overview of how to develop a realistic and workable system for quickly finding and enrolling eligible students.

Knowing the Region/State

The first step for the recruiter is to develop a picture of the region's agriculture, processing, and fishing industries to facilitate the search for migrant children. There are many sources for this information:

Department of Agriculture. Provides current information on land use, types of crops grown and processed, future harvesting trends, crop expansion (or reduction), and more.

State Department of Labor (DOL). Provides information on the whereabouts of farm labor. When farmers use more than a certain number of farm laborers, they are required by law to report this information to the DOL. A list of such farms can be obtained.

Cooperative Extension Programs. Provide information on a variety of farm-related issues through county extension agents who visit local farms and through key contacts at land grant colleges and universities. Agriculture faculty at these institutions often can provide valuable insights on changing harvesting trends, use of labor, mechanization of crops, and the human and political implications of these changes.

Other Regulatory Agencies. Provide information on regulations they monitor. For example, knowing the state's regulations regarding housing can facilitate finding eligible families by providing answers to questions such as "Is housing provided by the farmer?" or "Is housing adequate for families or for single men?"

Planning and Logistics

After gathering information about agricultural and fishing activities in the region, a recruitment plan should be developed (Johnson & Rivera, 1989). The plan should take into account input from those already working with the migrant population and provide strategies for administrators and recruiters. The plan should include at least the following components:

Hiring recruiters. Successful recruiters typically possess an empathy and dedication that motivates them to do whatever it takes to meet the needs of migrant children and their families (López et al., 2001). Hiring such people thus becomes key to a successful recruitment program. Other qualities of a good recruiter include being patient, down-to-earth, and willing to work flexible hours (California Department of Education, 1997; Johnson, 1989; Johnson & Rivera, 1989; Migrant Student Records System [MSRS], 2001; Virginia Migrant Education Program, 2001). The job requires a person who is willing to drive back roads, work at night, knock on doors in rural and poor neighborhoods, fend off barking dogs, and enter residences alone to solicit personal information to fill out an eligibility form. This job is not for the faint of heart. Good recruiters are people who are as comfortable talking to a school principal at the central office as to a recently arrived immigrant in a tomato field.

Because the migrant education program provides services to families from many different cultures and countries, it is best to hire recruiters of the same cultural or language group as the families being served. Speaking the same language and understanding the culture of the clients help facilitate the recruitment process (Johnson, 1989). Sometimes, though, it is difficult to find such people. In these cases, trained translators should be available to assist recruiters.

Deploying recruiters. Because the migrant education program has limited resources, the strategic deployment of recruiters is crucial. One efficient strategy is to obtain a list of recently arrived families from school districts (this can be difficult for non-school-based recruiters). The list can then be reviewed to identify families engaged in agricultural or fishing activities.

Building a recruitment network. A strategy such as the one mentioned above depends upon maintaining good relationships with local organizations and individuals who have direct contact with the farmworker population, such as schools, agencies, churches, migrant parents, and employers (Johnson, 1989; Lopez et al., 2001; MSRS, 2001; Rudes & Willette, 1990). These organizations and people become a recruiter's eyes and ears in the field (MSRS, 2001; Pennsylvania Migrant Education Program, 1999). Migrant program administrators can help by contacting school superintendents, employers of agricultural workers, and directors of other organizations that work with migrants to inform them about the program and its benefits to migrant children and youth. Recruiters can also help establish an interagency council of service providers.

Staying informed about program services. Because recruiters are the program's frontline force, they both *represent* the migrant program and, in many cases, *are* the program. Recruiters must have a detailed working knowledge of all the services offered by the program and other agencies (Johnson & Rivera, 1989; Wright, 1986).

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Training

Training of recruiters is key to the quality of any recruitment effort. Recruiters need to know about the statutes and regulations, and they need a variety of other skills including those described below:

Determining eligibility. Perhaps the most important role of the recruiters is to determine the eligibility of children into the migrant program (Johnson & Rivera, 1989; U.S. Department of Education, 1994; Wright, 1986). Recruiters must document basic demographic data, information related to the family's movement, and questions that pertain to the type of agriculture or fishing work done by the adolescent migrant worker or parents.

Assessing families' needs. Although the recruiter will enroll all eligible children and youth ages 0-21, the migrant education program has limited resources and cannot address all the children's and families' identified needs. Therefore, the program must develop a profile of the families' resources to meet the immediate needs as quickly as possible. The recruiter can be key in helping to conduct this initial assessment and also in helping a migrant family address its immediate concerns, providing referrals and information, and making them feel welcome in the new community.

Appropriately serving all eligible migrant children. While not all enrolled migrant children will receive the same level of services from the program, recruiters are still required to enroll all migrant children in their area. Migrant children, whether or not they receive direct or "visible" services (such as extended day or summer program) will still receive some of the "invisible" services provided by recruiters. Some of these services include advocacy in schools, referrals to other agencies, and parent training activities. However, recruiters must be well trained in documenting eligibility to avoid problems in program audits.

Working within language and culture customs. While it is preferred to have recruiters who can speak the families' native language or understand their cultural nuances, hiring such recruiters is not always possible. In these cases it is important that staff members are trained in the basics of the culture and language of the migrants they are recruiting in order to avoid misconceptions or misunderstandings. Questions such as, "Can a male recruiter enter a house without the father at home?" or, "Is it appropriate to accept/refuse food in the family's house?" should be discussed in training sessions. Having a basic knowledge of the "do's" and "don'ts" of the culture can go a long way when the recruiter is acting as the initial ambassador for the program (Pennsylvania Migrant Education Program, 1999).

Staying safe. Because of the type of job performed, recruiters probably face more hazards than other employees in a school system (Johnson, 1989). Examples of common policies implemented to protect recruiters include working in pairs in certain locations, not driving in hazardous conditions, and avoiding recruiting when temperatures are too high or too low. Safety issues will vary by region.

Community-based recruitment. Although many eligible migrant children can be found at school during the school year, preschool children, school-aged children during the summer, children of illegal immigrants, and young adults who do not attend school can be missed by a school-based recruiter. Identifying these populations requires a year-round community-based approach. Local Head Start programs, churches, and social service agencies are some places out-of-school children and youth may be found (MSRS, 2001; Virginia Migrant Education Program, 2001).

Audits

An important part of any quality control system is an independent review or "friendly" audit. As diligent as states or districts might be in their efforts to ensure the integrity of their Certificate of Eligibility (COE) and the honesty of their recruiters, an occasional review by people who are not a regular part of the system is generally considered to be beneficial. Sampling the COEs for accurate eligibility data and other concerns should be a part of the process. The establishment of a monitoring process, either formal or informal, can help any program update and improve its quality control measures.

Conclusion

A good recruitment system, like agriculture itself, is changing and dynamic. It needs adequate resources dedicated to its maintenance. By hiring the right people, preparing them with quality training, supporting them with caring administrators, and constantly monitoring the system for improvement, it can ensure that the migrant children and families who are eligible for the migrant education program will receive the services they are entitled to.

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